Unknown Young Woman late 1870s – early 1880s
From the Wells Smith Family Album

Reflections
Jeffrey Hunt
March 27 2026

A lovely young woman from the Wells Smith family album, unidentified. Her portrait appears near the back of the album, on page 39, opposite William Henry Smith and below the three unidentified sisters. Whether the photographs on that page are related is unclear. In this later portion of the album, the arrangement feels looser than in the earlier pages, so proximity may offer a clue, but not proof.

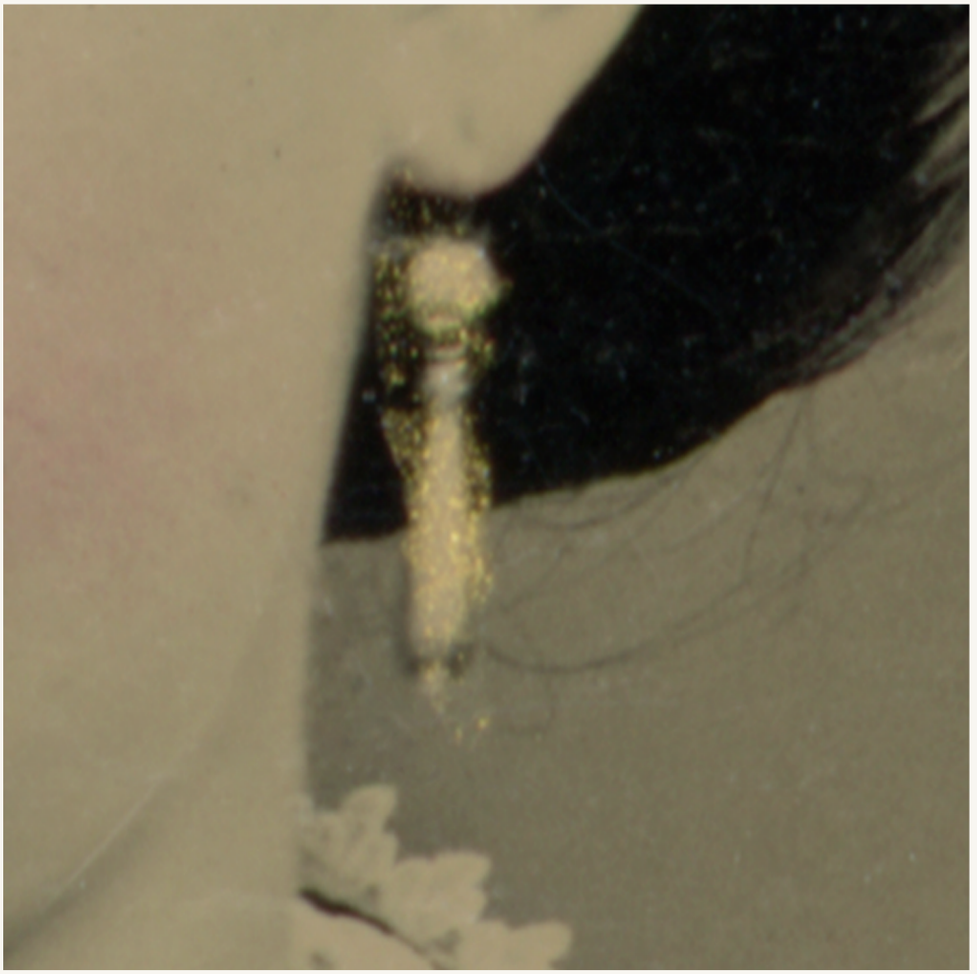
The photograph itself likely dates to around 1880. Her carefully parted and elaborately arranged hairstyle, together with the style of her dress and collar, places her comfortably in the late 1870s to early 1880s. She appears quite young, perhaps somewhere around sixteen to nineteen years old, though it is difficult to be more exact.

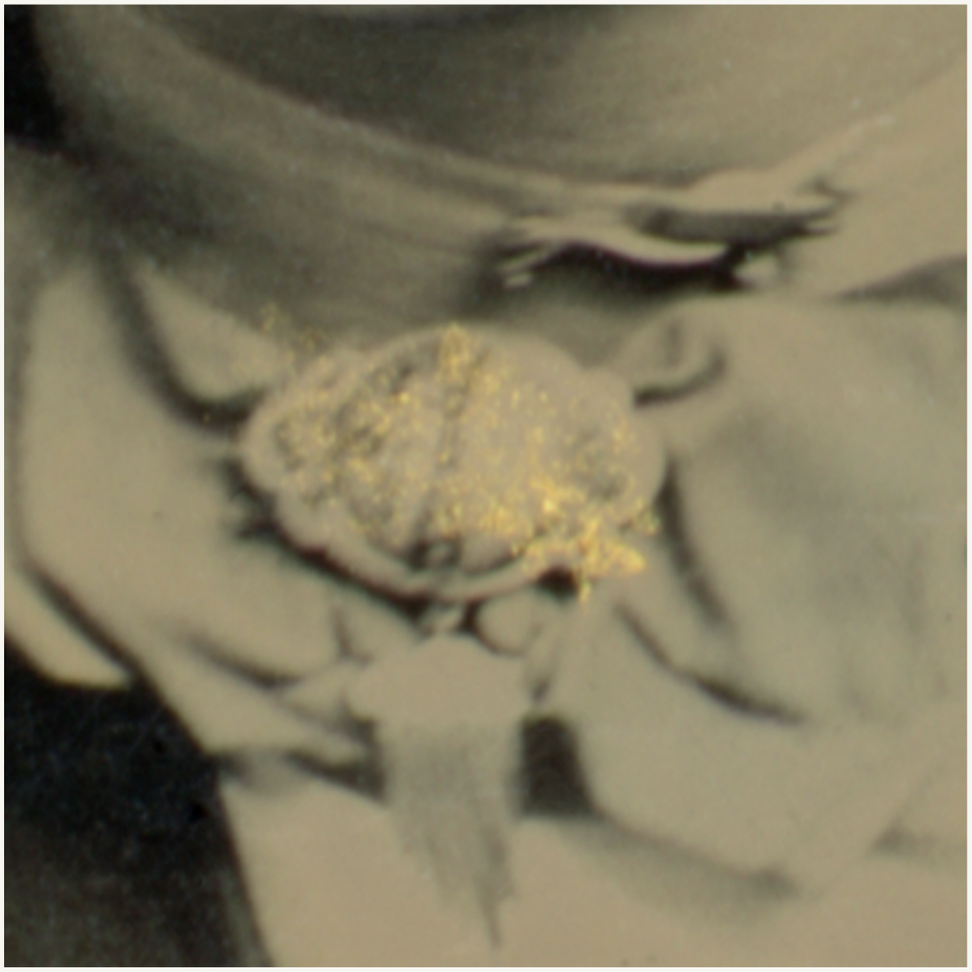
One of the most striking details is the delicate hand-applied gold highlighting on her jewelry. Enlarged, the tiny brushwork is remarkable. The earring and brooch are so small in the original photograph that the painterly touch used to pick them out feels almost astonishing in its miniature scale. It is a reminder that these portraits were sometimes finished by hand, and that even a small studio likeness could become an object of careful embellishment. Photography was still new.

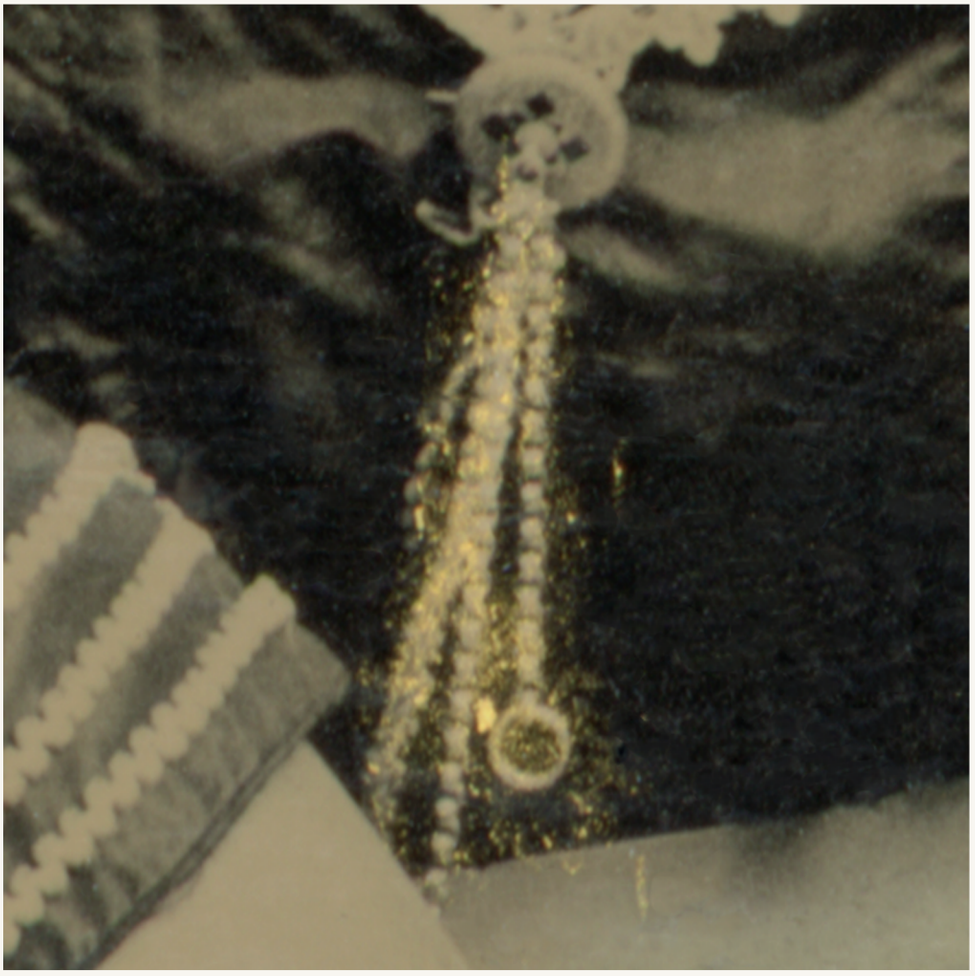
That gold is especially interesting because it raises questions beyond studio technique alone. There are other photographs in the album with similar brushed gold accents, so this may partly reflect a photographic convention of the period. At the same time, it also invites speculation about the sitter's family and circumstances. Many men left their claims for California in the rush for gold, and some no doubt brought new wealth back with them. There are accounts of the county being nearly emptied of men for a time. Whether that history is part of the story here is impossible to say with certainty, but the jewelry, the dress, and the overall presentation do suggest a young woman from a family of comfortable means.

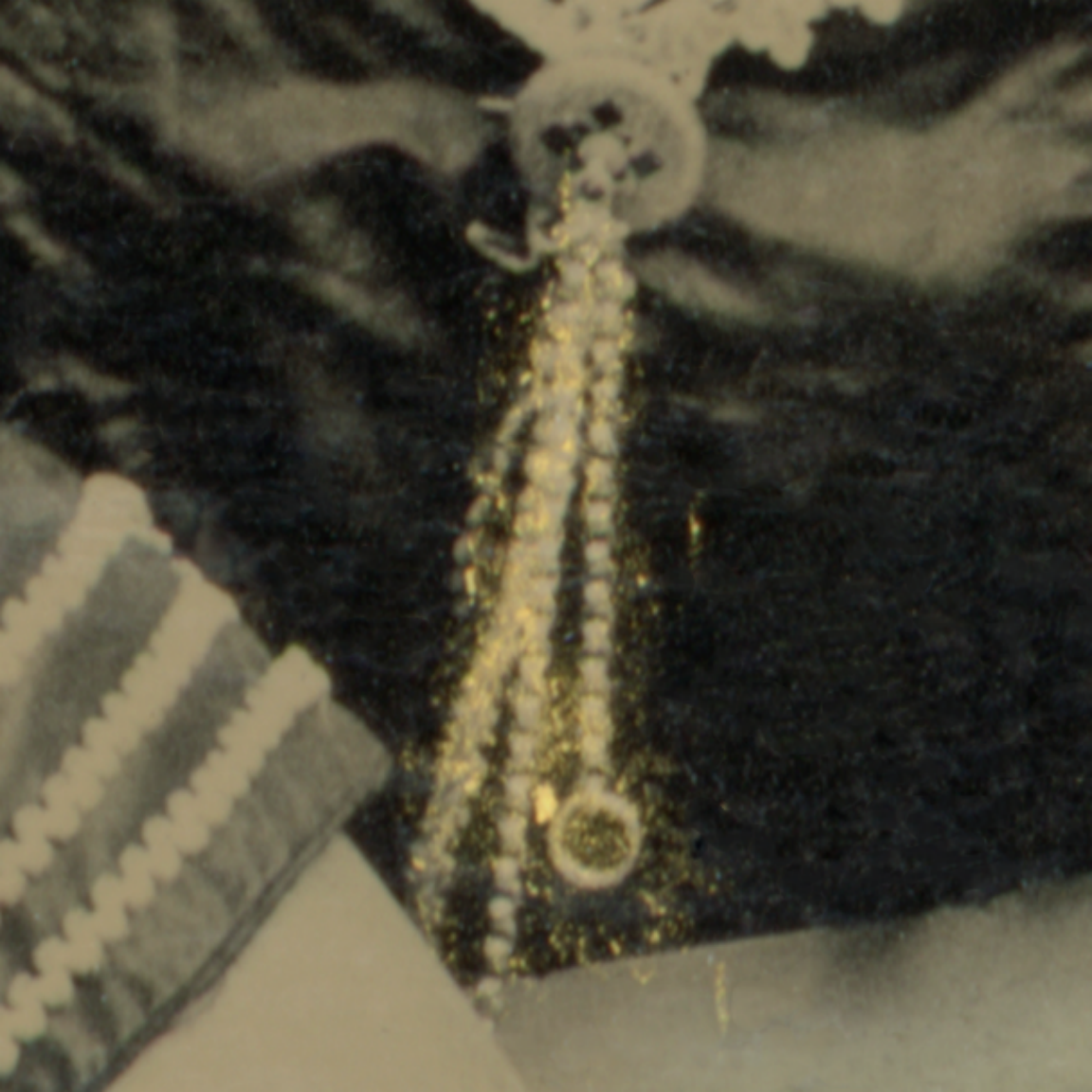
The border offers another possible clue. It matches borders seen on other photographs in the album, which may point to a local studio in Douglas County, where both the Wells and Smith families were firmly established and their family and community ties continued to grow.

She remains unidentified for now. The composed young face, the carefully arranged hair, the stylish dress, and above all the tiny flashes of gold remain preserved in a brief flash from another time.









Unknown Young Woman late 1870s – early 1880s
From the Wells Smith Family Album

Reflections – Sneak Peek
Jeffrey Hunt
March 26 2026

A small sneak peek from the Wells Smith family album. Many of the photographs in the album seem to date from around 1880, though there are certainly earlier examples and a few later ones as well. This particular portrait likely belongs to the late 1870s or early 1880s, as suggested by both the format of the photograph and the style of dress.

What a beautiful young woman. She remains unidentified for now, though her place near the back of the album may eventually help narrow the possibilities. There is a long list of extended family names she could be connected to — perhaps a niece, a cousin, a close friend, or someone else moving within that wider family circle.

I lightly updated this version with the help of AI, trying to preserve the exact structure and appearance of her face while bringing the photograph just a little closer to the eye of the present. I am not inclined to "update" every old photograph, but I do think there can be value in comparing a careful digital refinement with the original. At times it opens a small window and offers just a little more access to the astonishing reality of the past.

Clearly this is not the same young woman, but it is impressive nonetheless — certainly an extraordinary costume study.

Digitally, this image can now be viewed at a scale far beyond anything its maker would ever have expected it to bear, and yet the details still come through with remarkable grace. At that size, a little balancing and finishing can be helpful. But that does not replace the original. That part matters. The original photograph remains the true object, the real witness. Any refined version is only a companion — a way of looking more closely, never a substitute.

For now, this is simply a preview — a brief glimpse back from the album. What a striking and memorable face to find waiting there.